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The Soviets' Man in Tripoli

Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi is running scared these days. He's afraid of his own military. The last time he sent his troops into action—ordering them to invade Tunisia last August—they turned their guns on him.

Qaddafi is probably not too worried by recent disclosures that the CIA has put him on its enemies list with President Reagan's blessing. As we first reported in June, the CIA supported the disastrous coup attempt by Libyan exiles in May 1984. The CIA continues to back the leader of that fiasco, Mohammed Youssef Magarieff, though his chances of success appear no brighter now.

But if Qaddafi has little to fear from the CIA, the same cannot be said about the Soviets. Their hopes of consolidating their foothold in Libya have improved dramatically as Qaddafi's troubles have mounted. And their man is in place in Tripoli: he's Qaddafi's closest associate, Maj. Abdul Salam Jalloud.

Qaddafi's biggest problem is money—and it could be fatal. In the first decade of his rule, he could placate his people with oil money and with glib promises of continued prosperity. But the world oil glut changed everything. Oil makes up more than 99 percent of Libya's exports. Qaddafi now gets less than half the $22 billion a year that oil brought him in 1980.

Libyans realize that they are deep in debt to the Soviets as a result of loans Qaddafi got to further his grandiose plans. Shortages are everywhere, and Qaddafi's fabled charisma can't disguise the hard times—or the fact that he's largely responsible.

We've seen a secret CIA assessment that lists Libyans' "grievances" against Qaddafi. One is that he has been "squandering Libyan money, promoting utopian schemes and ignoring the country's best interests." Perhaps more significantly, the report notes that the higher-ups in Libya's 73,000-man armed forces are "angry about Qaddafi's free-wheeling approach to foreign policy and his refusal to share the making of major decisions with them." The CIA points out that there have been many more spontaneous coup attempts by the military in the past five years than in the 10 years after he seized power in 1969.

Much of the army's hardware—some $20 billion worth—was sold to Qaddafi by the Soviets on generous credit terms. He owes them for much of it, but the Russians aren't that concerned. They sold Qaddafi more than he needs, in the expectation that Libya will serve as a logistical base for Soviet mischief.

According to intelligence reports we've seen, the Soviets have already installed three SA-5 surface-to-air missile bases in Libya. These weapons have a range of 174 miles and are designed to shoot down high-altitude aircraft such as AWACS reconnaissance planes.

Two of the three sites are on the coast near Tripoli and Benghazi, threatening the U.S. Sixth Fleet and NATO allies in the Mediterranean. The third, in the southeastern desert, threatens planes in Egypt and Sudan. Several thousand Soviet personnel may eventually be brought in to man the missile bases.

Libya's strategic importance to the Soviets was increased by the recent coup in Sudan. The new Sudanese leaders are much friendlier to Qaddafi, and are cooling their relations with Egypt and the United States. A potential pro-Soviet bloc of Libya, Sudan and Ethiopia would isolate Egypt and give the Soviets a better chance to control northern Africa than they've had since they were kicked out of Egypt years ago.

These Soviet dreams of glory would shatter if Qaddafi were to be overthrown by the wrong people—namely, the exile groups that are making the first tentative steps toward unity. They would not be content to eliminate just Qaddafi, but would get rid of the top men around him as well.

This the Soviets will try their hardest to prevent. They want their man, Jalloud, to step up when Qaddafi falls. As for the Libyan military men who are the likeliest engine of Qaddafi's destruction, the CIA concludes that some of them are already growing concerned about "the Soviet connection." So far, though, Jalloud has been able to prevail.

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